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Recommended Citation

Bellia, Anthony J., "Professor Anthony J. Bellia Jr., Diploma Ceremony Address" (2015). *Commencement Programs*. Paper 176.
http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/commencement_programs/176

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Commencement Address
Notre Dame Law School Diploma Ceremony
University of Notre Dame

Anthony J. Bellia Jr.
O'Toole Professor of Constitutional Law

May 16, 2015

On behalf of Dean Newton and the faculty of the Law School, congratulations to the Class of 2015, and to your families and your friends, on the marvelous accomplishments that we celebrate today. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to share a few words with you.

In the coming weeks, months, and years, your roles in life will change dramatically – from student, assistant rector, editor – to lawyer, parent, board member . . . whatever. As this occurs, be careful that you do not fall into the trap I sometimes did in my younger days of thinking that you must forge your identity around one predominant prefabricated role. If you think this way, there is some risk that the role around which you forge your identity as a person will settle into work – work for work's sake.

The decks are stacked in favor of work defining who we are. From kindergarten, we are asked, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” The expected answers are job descriptions, and we direct an enormous amount of effort to preparing for them. In college, we pick a major, mindful of what we may want to be when we grow up. Post college, we pick a graduate program mostly on the basis of what we want to be when we grow up. Sitting here today, you now have completed several intensive years of study to prepare for what you are going to be.

We are programmed for work, and – let me be clear – this is not a bad thing, hardly. Our work holds enormous opportunities for adding social value, and, I might add, we need to earn a paycheck. It is good to prepare for work.

At the same time, it is important at least to be mindful of the fact that we do not self-consciously and systematically prepare in the same way for other central roles in our lives – the roles, for example, of friend, of mentor, of spouse, of parent, of adult child of an aging parent, and so on. Indeed, we can't systematically prepare for these roles in the same way. Consider the family life, if that is your calling, that may lie before you. You can't plan for marriage and family in the same way that you can prepare to be a lawyer. Who will your spouse be? Where will your spouse be from? What will your spouse's family be like? Will you and your spouse be able to have children? How many? What aspirations will your spouse have relative to your own? This is nothing we can successfully plan out in detail in advance, even if we were inclined to do so.

And, yet, it is in this terrain – the terrain of roles for which we cannot systematically prepare in the same way that we can prepare for work – that some of the deepest, happiest, saddest, most defining events of our lives will take place, and we will set the course for many of them, whether we are prepared to do so or not.

So, at this unique moment – as you move away from the roles you have had here at Notre Dame, and toward the new roles that lie before you – let me offer a few thoughts on how at least to think about preparing for these other roles.

First, think proactively about defining and shaping the roles to which you will give priority in your life. As is often said, life is a journey; it is not a guided tour. You are an independent force of nature whether you want to be one or not. You may think that the odds are stacked against you in some way, and they may be. But if you can do what it takes to walk across this stage – and you can because you have – you can overcome whatever pushes your future in a direction that you sense it should not go.

Second, as you fulfill your different roles in life, be especially mindful of those roles that only you can fulfill. For much of what we do, someone else, if we are honest with ourselves, could step in and finish the job as effectively. But if you are not there to be the best spouse, the best

parent, the best friend, the best priest, the best trusted mentor to those who depend on you in those roles, there is no one – no one – who can step in and do the job any better.

And this does not apply only to those roles that we might call “personal.” You will find in your “professional” lives that there are times when you have to step up and do something that should be done but that will not be done if you do not do it. A colleague tells the story of having to advise the President of the United States, against widespread political opposition, about a course of action the President should take because, as a matter of law, it was the correct thing to do. Give priority to those roles that only you can perform, but do recognize that the professional roles that you, and only you, can fulfill, may not be the ones that will bring you the most reward and recognition.

Third, in thinking about your roles in life, be especially mindful of the roles that you did not plan for yourself, and especially the roles that might be thwarting your own plans. You find yourself the caretaker to someone who is ill. You are on the receiving end of a bad break up. You are dealing with a difficult or unexpected child. You are living in a place you did not want to live. You are working in a job you do not want to have.

You may view such things as obstacles on the path that you are trying to pursue. “This situation is holding me back.” “This is not what I had planned.”

In these moments, hit the pause button, and take a step back. In retrospect, we often find that those things that we thought were obstacles along our path were in fact signposts toward a better direction. We look back and we see that the thing we thought was holding us back in fact enabled greater contributions, joy, and peace than we ever could have found without it. This thing—the illness, the break up, the difficult child, the moral dilemma – this is not an obstacle along your path; this is your path, and how you respond to this situation can transform it into one of the most fruitful opportunities for good that ever came your way.

Finally, as I ask you to define proactively and nurture the most important roles you will play in your life, it is important to acknowledge, honestly, that all of us fail at this all the time.

The last thing I ask of you, before you leave Notre Dame, is to try to respond appropriately to your own failures. Avoid despair – the feeling that I know what I should be doing, but given my past failures, I am just not capable of it, or, worse still, worthy of it.

I like the famous imagery that an airplane presents to reflect this situation. An airplane is off course 90 percent of the time. Flying a plane is largely bringing it back on course over and over and over again. You actually see this as planes fly low over campus to land, especially when it is windy. The plane goes off, the pilot brings it back, it goes off, the pilot brings it back. If you keep adjusting when you go off course, you will, like the airplane, arrive at your destination in the end.

If I may speak for one brief moment directly from the Catholic heart of this University – in a way that I think should resonate in every human heart – we should be especially mindful of how we respond to our own failings during this season of Easter, which the Church still celebrates. During this season, I am blessed to have a friend who reminds me each year of its core element. After Christ died on the cross, his followers locked themselves away in a room in fear. They were terrified. Of what? They were terrified, first, that they would suffer the same fate as Him. But they also were terrified *of Him*. They had abandoned Him – their dearest friend – to a horrible death – just abandoned Him. What was He going to do to them? Imagine their fear when He stood in their presence in that locked room. What did He do? He looked upon them and said, “Peace.” “Peace.”

When you entered Notre Dame, you were told that the giant mural on the side of Hesburgh Library is “Touchdown Jesus” – Jesus signaling a touchdown for the Irish. Of course it is not that. It is an image of the outstretched arms of Christ – a symbol, when you entered, of welcome to each and every one of you to this very special place of learning. Now, as you leave today, let that mural – on this, the other side of your legal education here – be a symbol of “peace” – peace in all the good that you have done here, peace in the failures and the regrets that you have as you leave, and peace in all the good that you are yet to bring about in your lives.

Find for yourself that gift of peace – you need it if you are going to embrace joyfully the most meaningful roles that your life will serve. Find that peace, and your example, in turn, will spread that peace to others. In this way, may your lives reflect the glory and the splendor of Notre Dame.

May God bless you all.